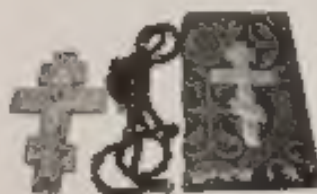


FORGIVE US, MERCIFUL LORD!

A General Confession for Great Lent

Led by Fr. Artemy Vladimirov

In Russia, where churches are filled to the streets during Christmas and Holy Week, general confessions are held in churches where it would be physically impossible to hear thousands of individual confessions. Although personal confessions are required throughout the year, regular parishioners who frequently partake of the sacraments, have been to confession in the previous weeks, and have not committed any serious sins, are allowed to attend a general confession a few days before these two great feasts in preparation for Holy Communion. The following text from one of these general confessions, led by Fr. Artemy Vladimirov of Moscow, is offered to our readers as a reflection for their own Lenten practice.



There remains, brothers and sisters, only one day of the Great Fast. Many of us remember reading a prayer on the eve of the fast in which we asked our Omnipotent Lord to give us strength and wisdom to walk this road to the end, that we might see Christ's Resurrection. The Christian who has tried to obey mother Church's regulations (though he may not be irreproachable) and repents of having stepped aside voluntarily or involuntarily from the path outlined by the Church for the Great Fast, today bears in his heart good fruit, a mind of profit: the grace of the Holy Spirit, Who supports those who toil, strengthens those who are exhausted, and brings the work undertaken by faithful Christians to a victorious finish.

Standing in church before the icons, we sense the all-seeing, strict yet merciful eyes of Our Saviour upon us. With God's help, let us now weigh our hearts and lives on the scales of Divine truth and love. It is not difficult. If we stand before God in spirit, He, Who is Light, will illumine all the dark corners of our heart, all impurity and sores, all the festering, deadly, and repulsive sins that cry out to God for our condemnation if we do not repent.

Looking, then, into the face of our Creator, let us ask ourselves, brothers and sisters, if we, as God's thinking creatures, have always preferred our Lord Jesus Christ; always considered Him to be the true God incarnate; named Him the Only-Begotten Son of the Father in Heaven, Co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit; have always felt and seen in Him the source and cause of our existence; given glory to Him as our Creator, Maker, Redeemer and Saviour, as our Teacher whose word is Spirit, Who Himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Looking back, most of us will confess with sorrow that much of our life has been darkened by ignorance. The image of Jesus Christ was not drawn in our heart and we shielded ourselves from the Eternal Light, perhaps even fighting against God or blaspheming Him – although we felt that He indeed is Light and Goodness. More often we simply turned our backs on Him. Many of us lived from our infancy outside the Church, not knowing its saving warmth, its omnipotent, all-victorious love, like plants devoid of sunlight.

Remembering those years, months, hours, and minutes of graceless existence, we rejoice that God has called us to His miraculous Light and mourn that, as involuntary apostates, we willingly immersed ourselves in ignorance and faithlessness.

♦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

We recall our blasphemous words (we may not have seen them as such then, thinking they were only jokes) when tempted by our classmates, teachers, or sometimes, our parents. We cast this verbal mire at our Lord Jesus Christ, despising the Truth and Love we saw in His face.

"Forgive us, Lord!" we cry, remembering that every sin, every blasphemy against the Son of Man will be forgiven those who did so out of ignorance and sinful blindness.

We confess the temptations we have caused, whether we are aware of them or not: of drawing our children, our relatives, our friends, into the darkness of disbelief in the Living God, and by our disorderly lives denying the vows of baptism pronounced by our godparents in early childhood. Let us repent before God for tempting others in deed and word, consciously or in ignorance.

♦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Contemplating the Lord Jesus Christ, we understand that spiritually serving Him is the true meaning of human life on earth. Standing before God we are to glorify, thank, and praise Him, to live in the angelic doxology: *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabbaoth, heaven and earth are filled with Thy glory.*

The sin of ingratitude to our Lord is connected to the sin of ignorance. Holy Scripture tells us that we were made to glorify God, to proclaim His perfection to the world, but we have been far from this. For many of us, our gloomy lives have been overshadowed by a spiritual night. Our souls were not animated by the breath of thanksgiving, and the world lost its color and warmth as we lost our spiritual connection with the Redeemer.

So, those who have spent days, months, and years of their lives without true thanksgiving, but who pronounced the words "Thank God" as a mean-

ingless phrase, should confess. Ingratitude blinds the human soul. Think of a baby completely dependent on his mother, who is fed with her milk, warmed with her love, but who feels no gratitude to her. Such are we, whom the Lord showers with hidden and open mer-



cies, whom He saves from danger. Let us remember the times when death walked beside us, but God mercifully held it back, even while we lacked the reason to see in this the hand of Christ.

Forgive us, Merciful Lord, for the times about which we knew and were not grateful, and the many times unknown to us, when God sent His angels to save us from certain danger and even death!

We confess to having breathed the God-given air, received our daily food, shelter, clothing, and all earthly goods without gratitude. The Lord brought us together in this life with those who, from all eternity, were destined to be our helpers, relatives and friends. We accepted all this as our due, daring to be dissatisfied and grumbling, if not against God, against His Providence. Thinking that our life is poor and dull, perhaps we have even been led to blaspheme.

Lord, forgive any of us, who in a moment of madness, damned the day of his birth, reproached his mother for having brought him into this world, or was stung by devilish suicidal thoughts, thus participating in Judas' betrayal.

• Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

It is easy to predict that the heart of an ungrateful Christian will be open to the repulsive, murderous spirit of gloom and sadness. Ignoring the voice of the Resurrected Lord through His apostle, calling us to "*rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks,*" we became as the living dead, filling our hearts with sadness, disappointment, and perhaps even despair — thereby losing God's grace, which does not abide in weak, uncourageous hearts.

Let us repent if this spirit has entered our very bones, and drive it out with prayer and repentance, asking the Saviour to enliven us with deep joy, cheerfulness, courage, satisfaction, and especially, gratitude. Even when we are



sad and burdened, we are to be thankful. The Lord Himself knows all that we have to bear, and, having been tempted for a little while, we will be rescued. Let us never drop the cross of patience, giving way to faint-heartedness and despondency.

• Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Turning our gaze towards Jesus Christ, we see and feel that God's creation is ruled by love. This is divine and eternal love, pure and holy love, love that has called the world from nonexistence, that maintains the orderly union of creation and enlivens every human being, giving him strength to live on earth. Christ is abun-

dance, filling everything with Himself. He is the source of Divine love, and through belief in God, prayer, repentance, and especially through the Church's sacraments, we become the transmitters of this Divine, eternal and ever-growing love.

What can you expect from a person who is so gloomy that he cannot give

thanks? If we have immersed ourselves in this unhappy state, it is no wonder that we only feel coldness, irritation, anger, vengefulness, and other hellish emotions in our soul.

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Have any of us become joyless beings who whine and burden the people around us with complaints, reproaches, and reprimands?

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Undoubtedly, the "one who hates his brother is a murderer." He lies in darkness. If you do not forgive — with all your heart — those who sin against you, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you. Therefore, we must thoroughly recall those moments and hours when we were filled with dark coldness, hate, and anger. Then, indeed, Satan himself ruled in our heart. How many caustic, spiteful, shameful, impure, murderous, blasphemous words were uttered at that hour? What injuries, unhealed sometimes for months and years, did we inflict upon those who love us, who were connected to us by bonds of kinship and affection?

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

What devastation the passion of anger leaves in the heart after it has scorched the soul with its lightning wrath! Such a person is taken by the evil one into Tartarus. The Christian has to toil, repent, pray, to resist with his spirit, mind, and will, that his heart may be completely healed by the action of the Holy Spirit.

Blessed, they say, and three times blessed, is he who has not allowed this murderous passion of anger into his soul. Let us look, brothers and sisters, into the hidden depths of our conscience. Is the poisonous snake of evil-speaking hate not hidden there? Perhaps this passion has escaped our attention. Maybe we still have someone whom we dare to call an enemy, someone whom, even now, we do not wish to live on this earth, whom we damn, wishing their eternal death, not even attempting to forgive them with all our heart. Here is a poison much more dangerous than narcotics. And if we do not spit this poison out of our soul today, the Saviour will reject us at the Last Judgement saying: *"Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil, hater of all good, and his angels."*

Let us ask God, the chief surgeon, to heal any of us who are infected by the passion of anger, who have been tortured, perhaps for many years, by dislike of our close ones. Let us look mentally at each of our relatives and acquaintances to see if there isn't any such poison in our hearts.

Lord, remove these thoughts and feelings, purify and fill the heart with mildness, mercy, meekness, love, patience, compassion. Do not allow this evil passion to continue to drain our life's blood!

• We repent, O loving Lord! Have mercy on us and forgive us.

Our omnipotent Saviour is purer than heaven itself with all its angels. Each of us knows well that love is a pure and holy feeling and that the Lord has founded a grace-filled refuge to shelter us. Such a refuge for the Christian is either blessed celibacy with external or internal dedication of oneself to God, or marriage, accomplished with vows of mutual fidelity before a priest in the sacrament of the Church.

Unfortunately, demons have toiled over us, disfiguring the God-given beauty of our nature by filling our inexperienced and ignorant souls with the passions of impure lust. Even our youngest years were not spared: we did not know when to hide our eyes, how to fight against the thoughts that penetrated for the first time and lodged themselves in the depth of our heart. Even in extreme youth some of us partook of the filth of impure dreams, desires, images, fantasies — the rotten roots that produce the tree of fleshly impurity, the tree that twists and distorts natural virtue and the thirst for heavenly love put into us by God.

Forgive, Merciful Lord, the sins of indiscretion committed in childhood, for peeping and impure touches — perhaps without complete awareness, but already springing from an impure heart; for games we learned watching the unchaste life of adults.

• Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Let us confess to God (and for those who have already confessed, regret) that many of us have sinned against the virtue of innocence, of virginity, having parted with these outside a marriage blessed by God; thus becoming not only criminals to ourselves, but tempters to those who stumbled over our lustful impurity.

• Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

We also beg and pray to wipe out of the book of life all of those sins that must be disclosed to a priest in sufficient detail in private confession, that we may completely drive out of our souls the spirit of sensuality. Especially burdened is the conscience of a Christian who has already promised his faith and fidelity to a beloved spouse, but sins against this first love, falling into adultery. *Be not deceived*, says the Apostle Paul. If they do not repent ...*neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers ... inherit the Kingdom of God. Marriage was created pure by God and the marriage bed is undefiled.* Let us repent, knowing ourselves to be guilty of these sins, if not in deed then in thought, when we reached for the forbidden fruit.



✦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Let us repent also of the general impurity of our life. There are many people who appear to guard themselves well, living in matrimonial virtue, but you had better not look into their hearts. They themselves avoid doing so because they resemble a stinking pit burning with fire and sulfur from indecent reading and impure images. Through such captivity some have been driven by the devil to unpronounceable sins of self-pollution.

✦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Repentance is very important for those parents who have not been sufficiently attentive towards their offspring; shutting their eyes to their children's cassettes, disks, and books with unclean contents. Those parents should also repent who did not see anything wrong in allowing their children to watch adult films. The parent who has allowed the mass media in his home to drift with the times has a heavy burden on his soul for connivance, for not opposing evil with good, for not tearing his children from the sources of temptation and impurity. Who, if not the parents, will answer to God for the children's sins?

Forgive us, Merciful Lord! Give us wisdom and strength to put things right, to do everything needful to educate the coming generation.

Our times are also characterized by the sin of not relying on God's providence and mercy. How many of us bear in our hearts exhausting fears, anxiety, vague apprehensions, and panic? The merciful Lord commands us to



keep peace in our hearts. Holy Scripture warns us of the coming time of trial, *"Have my peace within you ... be not terrified ... but pray always that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man."*

How many of us Orthodox Christians fail to understand the Lord's command to be the light of the world? In our days, a Christian is like a star shining in the depth of night. However, some of us, while appearing pious, are downcast, gloomy creatures, ill-disposed toward people, never acknowledging the virtues of affability, sympathy,

striving towards virtue; all the while hiding under a pious appearance, the repulsive passions of selfishness, self-love, and hard-heartedness.

How can we repent if these things are our skin, our bone, our flesh? We were born in this sin and will die in it if God does not enlighten us with His grace. Let us pray that the Lord takes from us the blinders of self-love and teaches us to serve others, to forget ourselves and our own benefit (at least a little and occasionally) for the good of our neighbor. Lord, help us to apply these words to ourselves and not to the person standing next to us.

✦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Our Saviour is divine abundance, filling everything with Himself, alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. Everything is in Him, and everything moves towards Him. Our Saviour is the One who quenches our thirst for knowledge, for true fulfillment. He is the life of the human soul,

but often the soul is not persuaded of this and strong temptation brings about the corruption of both soul and body. Such burdens, such consuming sins, include:

... a weakness for wine.

Lord, help us, purify us and give us victory!

...a weakness for food and drink, inducing us to break the holy fasts, paralyzing us and obscuring our view of eternity.

Lord, teach us to find a right measure here. Give us noble, prayerful hearts, grateful for all that Thou hast given.

...smoking.

Lord, purify this filth from our soul and body.

... and weakness for "light," but actually very dark, reading and television.

✦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Television is the bait for a God-loving soul of our days. Only he who knows what he watches and for what reason does not suffer from this spiritual disease, and can learn useful things for his life on earth. Unfortunately, such people are few; most of us are caught by the forces of worldly evil and through them we live lives of corruption, not as contemplatives but as blockheaded parishioners of the flickering screen.

Forgive us, Merciful Lord, and help us to rid ourselves of this wicked disease that deprives us of spiritual advancement.

Here, we will probably also want to repent of deeply rooted pride, ambition, vanity, thinking much of ourselves, for our lack of meekness and wise humility.

Forgive us, Lord, for arrogance, conceit and the ignorance that unites them.

Forgive us, Lord, for the inability to ask forgiveness, for our stung self-esteem, for keeping in our memory injuries and insults inflicted by our neighbors.

✦ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Forgive us, Lord, for judging and blaming others, for being Pharisees and hypocrites, for pretending to have virtues that we do not really possess. Forgive us, Merciful Lord! Purify and enlighten our souls with mildness, mercy, generosity, kind-heartedness. Teach us to judge no one but ourselves.

As we turn to the Lord, perhaps we see some forgotten sins of stealing (even in far-away childhood), dishonesty, lying, greed or love of money.

Let us consider another wound — spiritual adultery. A human being is a creature whose immortal soul seeks God, and he will inevitably worship something higher than himself. Unfortunately, not all of us quickly found the healthy, prophetic, saving, and holy Orthodox faith. Many of us fell into nets of spiritual delusion.

Forgive us, Merciful Lord, for having been strangers to our mother Church, for the doubts that grew like weeds in our soul as we listened to heretical and pagan teachers and guides.

+ Purify us, Merciful Lord!

Forgive us for satiating our unredeemed curiosity with so-called “mystical” reading, thereby killing our soul. Indulging in “eastern” and “new age” teachings, we appropriated the ugliest and most blasphemous ideas of the impersonal nature of the Divine, of reincarnation, of the unique human personality turning to nothing or losing itself in an ocean of spiritual energy after death.

How hard it is for some people, poisoned by the satanic malice of heresy, to rid themselves of these ideas. Let us repent that God may purify our minds and hearts and never allow these poisonous seeds to be resown.

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Forgive us for false thinking, for not being apostles of Orthodoxy, for being sick with ignorance, mixing faith and superstition. Forgive, O Lord, those of us, who, seeking bodily or spiritual health, addressed occultists, shamen, or “new age” healers. Sometimes, we have even been deceived by the Christian appearance of their homes or offices, when, in fact, they inflicted demonic possession upon us, either in our presence or in our absence.

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

Make right our faith, purify and seal us with the divine, saving, God-disclosed dogma of truth imprinted in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, and guarded, understood, and taught aright only in the holy, catholic, apostolic, Orthodox Church.

+ Forgive us and have mercy on us, Lord!

We repent of all the forgotten, unknown, and unidentified sins, not yet named in our confession.

+ Forgive us, Merciful Lord!

We repent of making our sins appear mild, of having no strength to call things by their proper names. It is hard to judge oneself but it saves, for when we approach the Cross and the Gospel knowing that this could be our last confession, and that ahead of us lies the Great Judgement, then what relief, what purity and joy God gives to even a hardened sinner who confesses without justifying himself.

We repent before Thee, Lord! We have sinned in word, deed and thought, by all of our senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and all other sins, spiritual and bodily. We have sinned by long-forgotten sins, sinned by many blasphemous, impious, impure thoughts, which are impossible to speak aloud.

Brothers and sisters, let us collect all of our sins into one imagined vessel of repentance, and taking this vessel into the hands of our soul, let us mentally plunge it into the sea of God's mercy, that no one may doubt God's grace and love, but will know that God Himself forgives, purifies, and saves us, if only we promise:

"I repent before Thee, O Lord, of all these spoken and unspoken sins. Forgive and absolve me, even as the priest will testify to today's confession at the Last Judgement, and I, sinful (*name*) promise to make every possible effort to guard myself from the sins I have confessed." Amen. +